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In search of the underground

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IN SEARCH OF THE UNDERGROUND

by

JOHN M. SCHWARZ

B.A. Montana State University, 1955

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

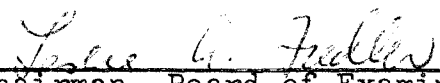
for the degree of

Master of Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

1959

Approved by:


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

JUN 3 1959

Date

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INTRODUCTION

Of all the personalities to burst on the American scene during the past decade, two of the most interesting were James Dean and Holden Caulfield. The first was an actor impossible to dissociate from the role he played in Rebel Without a Cause; the second is a character in the novel, The Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger. At first, it seems improbable that these two characters should have appealed so strongly to the American public; although they both were versions of the tormented adolescent at a time when this topic was so popular, the very fact that they are adolescents makes them seem a bit insignificant in a world that obviously needs adults. What was it then?

Rebel Without a Cause, as the title indicates, is supposed to be dealing with the revolt unjustified by either provocations or aims. As it turns out, however, Dean, the rebel, does have a great provocation: he is disappointed in a world that refuses to live up to the ideals that it has set for itself. The best and closest symbol of this refusal that he can find is his father--a man who not only seems embarrassed by the old ghosts of ideals floating about in his son's school boy mind, but also a man who finds it impossible to be a man. (Although his wife is never shown wearing

his pants, he is shown wearing her apron.) In order for Dean to call attention to his father's failure to represent authority and tradition, Dean does two things: he becomes very bad and he becomes very good. He is bad in that he fights with knives, races cars, stays away from home; but he is good in that he is brave, upholds the gang's laws, and all of this is, anyway, his means of making the world's chaos known! The movie ends with Dean refusing the world as it is. He accepts the fact that he will be an outcast, but the strangest thing is that he will be an outcast for precisely the opposite reasons as, say, Huckleberry Finn; he is thrown out of society for wanting a "good" marriage, and kids and a decent job. It is these things, the movie suggests, which are almost impossible to find.

There is a great deal of similarity between Rebel Without a Cause and The Catcher in the Rye. Holden Caulfield, the main character of this book, revolts because of the world's falsity. He is obsessed with the idea that there is a direct relationship between advancing age and a deepening commitment to sham, vulgarity, commercialism, corruption. During the course of the book Caulfield is kicked out of prep school and spends a few days on his own wandering about New York City. In his horribly depressed state, it is impossible for him to withstand all this new evidence of the world's perversion: the unconcern of the city, the pimp, the whore, the sex deviate plunge him further into darkness, until, at one

point, he has a nervous breakdown. Here again the implication is clear. Holden is bad according to everyday judgments of society, but according to the ideals society is supposed to live by, he is extremely good! He is so virtuous, in fact, that unless the world will assume a shape more closely resembling the vision of a sweet Sunday school child, Caulfield cannot bear to live in it--at least not without the aid of a psychiatrist.

The fact that Dean and Holden Caulfield are both good-bad boys may in some respect account for the impact they had on their audience. The tradition that a boy must be slightly bad in order to be good dates back at least as far as The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, and probably indicates that we are always a little worried that our children will take what we say about the world too seriously. In other words, we always hope that our children will be smart enough to see through the lies we would rather not acknowledge. But Tom Sawyer's badness saves him! it always leads him to the kind of knowledge that makes him rich or a hero--not an outcast! Apparently, then, the bad part of the good boy is no longer his salvation. This is certainly the case--unless the only way to be saved nowadays is to martyr oneself by renouncing life. In this post christian world this seems like the most fantastic notion, and yet even more fantastic is the hope that no matter what our sins our children will remain uncorrupted; that they will just not accept the mad world we hand them.

It is the unreality of this hope that In Search of the Underground attempts to expose. Bobo Decker is exactly the kind of boy we might expect to find today. Not only does he appear to be chronically depressed, but he is also strangely barren and limited by the mass culture that created him. And in contrast to Dean and Holden Caulfield, Bobo Decker lacks virtue--is, in fact, more on the side of evil than anything else.

Although Bobo's world is only seen through his eyes and is naturally colored by his propensity for seeing blackness, it is nevertheless a mournful place. The house he lives in is dark and creaky, haunted by the ghost of his mother, and definitely the kind of place from which one tries to escape. (The father is gone before sunrise each day; after the sister marries, she moves hundreds of miles away.) As a matter of fact, most of the scenes in the book take place under the ground--in men's rooms, the subterranean passages of a school, in a dark, hole-in-the-wall candy store, in a subway train going deeper into a tunnel. Furthermore, the action of the book covers one winter's day, and it rains the whole time.

This background is not necessarily more dismal than the background against which we see Holden Caulfield. The difference is, however, that Bobo Decker instead of rebelling against his time, actually craves the darkness he feels is the essence of the period in which he lives. At one point

in the story, Bobo shouts that he is--he really is like Tom Sawyer! but if this is true, it is only the darker aspects of Tom, the Tom who goes into the caves, who hates school teachers, who might die and never resurrect himself.

In all three fictions, Rebel Without a Cause, The Catcher in the Rye, and In Search of the Underground there is one adult character who is willing to admit the ghastly truth about the world, and who has the opportunity to help the protagonist during his particular crisis. In Rebel Without a Cause this character is a friendly cop who sympathizes with Dean's protest, and who, at the last moment, saves the boy from destruction. In The Catcher in the Rye, the friend, a former school master, turns out to be--at least as far as Caulfield is concerned--a homosexual. The friend in In Search of the Underground is also a teacher, but it is significant that the gap between Bobo and the teacher is greater than the gap separating the other two couples. For Bobo his teacher is nothing more than a Mr. Z.. Although Mr. Z. might be able to help Bobo increase his frame of reference, to somehow push back the walls of the cave that he lives in, Bobo is so anti-intellectual that he is unable to communicate with any meaningful tradition. Not only that, even if Bobo did study Z.'s course of American literature, it is very possible that he--like one of his classmates--would end up wanting to be Poe's character Hop-Frog. And to complicate matters still further, Z. himself is a has-been;

his description fits the old, haunting face of Leon Trotsky, the dead revolutionary.

In a story as negative as this, where the protagonist is so horribly trapped, it is difficult to explain how Bobo Decker can rush about so, how he can even have the illusion of going someplace. Where is he going in such a hurry? The most obvious answer is that he is heading deeper into the underground, but it is necessary to define what the underground means here.

Bobo Decker's time is such a cold time that he--as well as some of his companions--actually has the sensation of being a debauchee at the early age of eighteen. Smoking and drinking, for example, are disasters that Bobo has been experimenting with as long as he can remember. Love is merely a stitch in the side; school is a bore enlivened only by warfare with the teachers; even the comic books are Mad! The only way that one might come up with a new program in such a dead winter would be to turn back in the way that Holden Caulfield did. This Decker is not prepared to do. His main fear, in fact, is that evil will fail to excite him. The only course of action, it seems to him, is to burrow deeper into the unconscious where he finds those impulses he both fears and desires. For this reason he goes to dirty movies, makes friends with sadists and anarchists like his pal Jack Stritter, frequents the hangouts of homosexuals. Finally at the lowest level of the underground of

the unconscious, he discovers the death which must appear to him to be the only true heritage.

This is really the point at which the story began. Decker tells in the beginning how he crept..."down the hall to (his) old lady's room, opened the door a crack, and looked inside. She was lying in bed, covered up with a sheet.... Her face was grey and (he) noticed her mouth was kind of caved-in. 'She's dead,' it suddenly occurred to (him)." By the end of the book, Decker has arrived at a similar point. It is 3:00 A.M. down at the Battery, the end of Manhattan, when he turns for the last time to the underground. In a bar close to the subway entrance a juke box is playing, and as he dances down the steps toward the rumble of the trains below, he hears a man-woman voice weaving in and out with the maddest saxophone. Reaching the platform and boarding an empty train, he rides up front, looks through his reflection at the dingy walls and the glinting tracks. After a while another reflection stands next to his, a reflection that seems to have materialized from the newspapers and wrappers lying on the floor of the car. The specter links arms with Decker, who tries half heartedly to pull away, but the arm holds him tighter and the two sway together as the train rushes down into the tunnel below the river.

CHAPTER ONE

Thursday is usually about the worst day in the week for me. Wednesday night I go to the movies with some of the guys from school, and then we go to Milton's and sit around drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes for about five hours. By the time I get home and crawl upstairs to my room, I'm always pretty nervous and depressed, and I lie in the dark for a couple of hours, trying hard to get to sleep. Often I seem to hear voices coming from the front of the house and, at the same time, from deep inside me. The voices whisper and argue and even shout, but I never really understand anything. If I lie there long enough without shaking my head or blinking my eyes, the words actually make me dizzy; and, sometimes, I get the feeling my body is turning to cement, that my arms and legs are becoming slabs that grow heavier and heavier, until I think I might drop through the bed and crash down through the floorboards. It's easy to see a night like this leaves me feeling pretty rotten in the morning.

Anyway, when I woke up this Thursday morning, I had a sore throat and the first thing I did was to quit smoking cigarettes. I dragged myself out of bed, hacking and coughing away, put on my pants in the dark, and sneaked down the

hall to the bathroom where I flushed my cigarettes down the toilet. Of course, as soon as I had watched them whirl out of sight, I began to crave one, but I tried to deny it, because I knew they were really ruining me.

From the way the bathroom looked I could tell the old man was up and off to work already. The bathroom is always a little dank and mouldy, because the linoleum on the floor and walls is all cracked and peeling, and because there's only one small window which nobody ever bothers to open. What the hell, the neighbors live about two feet away on the other side of the driveway. But this morning the floor was really clammy where the old man had splashed water while he was shaving, and there were blobs of shaving cream and bits of black hair in the sink. I managed to splash some water on my face, though. Then I sneaked down the hall to my old lady's room, opened her door a crack, and looked inside. She was lying in bed, covered up with a sheet. During the night she had tossed all the blankets down to the foot and onto the floor, but now she seemed calm enough. Her face was grey and I noticed her mouth was kind of caved-in. "She's dead," it suddenly occurred to me. But a loose strand of hair across her mouth trembled when she breathed, so I went back to my bedroom.

There I put on a clean shirt and a pair of socks without turning on the light, grabbed my shoes, and walked down the hall in my stocking feet. When I got to the stairs, I

started creeping down like a secret agent or something. It's not like I'm exactly hiding from my mother; it's just that ever since I started smoking and staying out late at night, I never have any appetite in the morning. If I waited for her to get up, she'd rush into the kitchen in one of those terry cloth robes and start cooking eggs and oatmeal like crazy. And while I'm choking away on everything, she'd work herself up about me coming home too late at night, and how I'd have to quit my job at Woolworth's and everything. You know, all sorts of questions like that until everybody would be sore, and I'd have to jump up and rush out and slam the door in her face.

Anyway, when I got down to the bottom of the stairs, there was a little washed-out light coming through the crocheted curtains on the front door, but the rest of the living room was dark. As a matter of fact, everything was so quiet and dim, I began to feel sleepy. I don't know, I guess I must have strained myself with getting up and walking around, because I felt all tired out, and I went over to the brown hide-a-bed and flopped down on my stomach with my face on the itchy cushions.

The goddamn old hide-a-bed is the main piece in the living room. I get quite a kick out of the word piece. My girl Toby is pretty rich. She's always talking about furniture, and how she'd be content with just a few nice pieces to start with. I mean it's fairly funny if you think about

it. The hide-a-bed comes in handy when we have company, though--by company I mean my sister, who married this real stable character, this school teacher. But it's a lot of trouble to use. If you want to open the bed out, you have to move the big brown adjustable leather chair the old man lies around in to watch television, and the room gets cramped as hell. Whenever my sister and her husband are staying at the house, I'm always coming home at night and smashing my goddamn shins or knocking over one of my mother's prize knick-knacks. Naturally all the lights go on, and my mother screams, "Who's there? Help! Robbers in the house!"

My sister got married about four years ago, when I was fourteen. At the time the old man rented the Legion Hall and put on this really terrific blast. All the aunts and uncles I hardly ever saw before came trooping over from New York City. They all live in a cold water flat we call the barracks, where the rent is about twenty bucks a month, only my grandmother gets her apartment for nothing by mopping out the halls once in a while. I remember when I was a kid, we went over to visit them on this really hot day. It was the kind of visit that sticks in your mind, because, like I said, it was so goddamn hot, and we got cooped up in my grandmother's kitchen all afternoon. All the time we were there, my grandmother, who is this big fat old babe with dead kind of eyes and black teeth, is feeling my arm like the witch in Hansel and Gretel and trying to get me to eat hard-boiled

eggs. Then these big muscular guys came in and sat around in their undershirts drinking quarts of beer and looking out the window. I never did honestly understand who everybody was. There were about two or three Aunt Lids and a lot of Uncle Toms and one lady whose hands trembled all over the place.

Everybody I saw in my grandmother's kitchen showed up for the wedding--even the lady with the shaky hands, who I found out wasn't a relative at all, but just a friend of the family living with my grandmother. The men were all dressed in dark suits, and the women wore shiny silk dresses. It didn't take long for the party to get going either. On each of the tables there was a bottle of whiskey and two bottles of beer. The old man and the other men didn't stay in their seats much. They were always over at each other's tables, having a drink with old Joe or somebody, and the women were drinking a lot too, although they pretended to just be taking little sips out of their shot glasses. I had a few beers myself. As a matter of fact, that was the first time I ever really got drunk. My mother only looked at me and laughed. Then she turned to Aunt Lid and said in this drunk voice, "I think Bobo's a little tipsy."

Later on a photographer came in and broke up the party. That was just before I rushed out in the alley and puked my guts out. First he took some pictures of my sister giving my brother-in-law these adoring looks, with all the women

going "aw" everytime the photographer blasted off another flash bulb. Then everybody lined up for the group shot. The picture is on the mantelpiece at home. I get sick everytime I look at it.

Now my sister lives up in Utica, New York. She and her husband are doing all right, I guess, although he doesn't make any money being a school teacher. It doesn't bother me any they only come down to see us about once a year either, because when my brother-in-law is in the house, I feel like I'm surrounded by school teachers. He has this real slow, sincere way of talking and is always getting me off in a corner so he can ask me a lot of questions about high school, and what I'm going to do this year after I graduate. I think he's trying to psychoanalyze me, but I manage to throw him off the track by mumbling and shrugging my shoulders. It's a laugh that his wedding was the first time I got drunk. Ever since I've had this terrific thirst for beer too.

I guess things usually happen like that with me--I mean they have a way of backfiring a lot. The first time the nicotine habit got a grip on me, for example, was at a church dinner I went to with my old man. This affair was one of those big campaigns to bring the fathers and sons together and to get the boy athletes to break their rotten habits. The whole theme of the evening was that you couldn't get anywhere without clean habits--especially in the world of sports. About ten guys told us all about this before we

even started to eat, and when the minister said grace, he kept asking God to keep our bodies and minds clean. That part about the mind really got me, because even then I could think of anything.

After we finished eating the usual church food, all the men lit up cigars, and all the kids sat around munching jujubes or something like that. Finally the main speaker arrived. He was this real famous athlete--of course, only a few of the dads ever heard of him--by the name of Wade Cunningham. After he was introduced, we all cheered like hell until Wade held up his hands and started talking like a madman. In the beginning he kept your interest because you were surprised anyone could talk so fast. Later on, though, you realized he was talking an awful lot about himself: all about how a stove blew up on him when he was a kid, and the doctors said he would never walk again, and how he promised himself he'd not only walk but run. Before you knew it, he was the fastest damn runner in the world. He could run a hundred yards in about six seconds and broad jump about thirty feet. But so you wouldn't think he was conceited or anything, he also told a lot of stories where he was always making mistakes and almost losing the ball game. The kids really liked him quite a lot while he was telling the sports stories. He was a big tall bastard who actually looked like he had a lot of stuff.

Near the end of his speech, though, he started telling

us all why he was such a champion. He had worked hard, sure, but he always made it a point to steer clear of the beverage alcohol, tobacco, and the use of narcotics. He said he never allowed his name to be used in an advertisement for whiskey or cigarettes; he claimed he's probably lost a lot of money on that point. Right after that he didn't seem so sharp any more. What the hell, everybody knows if some joker says he smokes Phillip Morris in an advertisement, it doesn't mean anything. And the way he was ranting away about narcotics, you'd think we were a bunch of main-liners.

I didn't pay much attention to the end of the speech. There were a lot of cardboard sample packets of Phillip Morris lying around on the table, and I was busy helping myself from a pile that had been dumped right in front of me. I wasn't exactly lighting up on the spot, but there was something appealing about those little boxes, and I figured if I never smoked the cigarettes, the packets might come in handy for some small stuff I might want to carry around.

Before the evening was over, there was one more little high point. That was this trick a friend of mine, Argenti, pulled. Turning to the guy sitting next to him, he whispered in this fairly loud voice, "Ask the chief what he thinks about jackin' off." This got quite a laugh from some of the guys, although they tried to keep it muffled up.

The supply of cigarettes I got from the banquet lasted

for a couple of weeks after that. I smoked most of them out in the weeds that grow behind my house. In the beginning I was just kidding around, and I used to light up three or four cigarettes and jam them all in my mouth at once. Christ, I'll bet a lot of the time I must have looked like my whole head was on fire. During those days smoking really became a habit, though. I don't think I'll ever be able to stop. Even though I swore off cigarettes this morning, I know I'll be back on them in a couple of hours. They kill me, I admit it. They make me nervous and give me this black outlook on life; I get terrible sore throats, and, sometimes, when I breath deep, I even get a pain in my back. But I know I'll never be able to stop. I guess I'm caught for good.

Well, while I was lying on the hide-a-bed, the floorboards creaked overhead in my mother's bedroom. Jesus, the way I jumped up, you would have thought she was coming back from the dead to get me. I charged all the way over to the front door and had my hand on the knob before I remembered I still didn't have my shoes on. I thought I was trapped for sure. I could almost hear my mother's slippers scuff down the hall toward the top steps of the stairway. My ears ached from listening, and my head felt like it would fly up like a balloon.

Then I realized it was all a mistake; nobody was moving around upstairs at all. It was a little like those voices

that whisper and argue in my head at night when I can't get to sleep. No kidding, a really good imagination can bother you a lot.

After a few minutes I went back to the hide-a-bed and began to put on my shoes. While I was sitting there, the house was creaking away, but I knew it was only the hot air starting to drift up through the registers. Even then the noises scared me a little. The furnace was roaring down in the basement, and I knew it wouldn't be long before the old lady heard it too. I got on my shoes real fast after that, and rushed over to the closet under the stairs for my Hawks A. C. jacket, and slipped out the front door.

It felt like snow outside. I guess it wasn't actually cold enough yet, because there were a lot of puddles that weren't frozen, but the sky was cloudy, and the wind must have been close to freezing. The air was also a little mournful like it gets before a snow storm. Over on the turnpike a couple of blocks away the busses didn't sound as loud as usual, and whenever anyone blew his horn, it sounded kind of muffled.

I think I mentioned the houses are packed close together in my neighborhood. They're all tall and narrow, and they jut out of the side of the hill at funny angles. They don't look bad in the summertime when the leaves are out, but in the winter the trees are bare and the bushes scraggly, and the place looks awfully morbid. Right now

the wind was really sweeping up the hill. I hated to fight it; it could have blown me away for all I cared. Finally, though, I turned up my collar, buried my hands in my pockets, and started down the hill toward town. With my shoulders hunched up and my arms tight against my sides, my crummy jacket managed to keep out at least some of the cold. I had the damn thing made by a tailor in Newark, and the guy robbed me. It looks pretty sharp, because it's made out of black satin with HAWKS A. C. in black felt letters across the back. I got the idea out of Wings Comics, but it doesn't have much warmth to it.

At the bottom of the hill I stopped in at the bakery in order to get warm. Although I was just going to stand there a minute, looking out the window, a lady came up from the back of the shop. She had grey hair and steel rim glasses, and she stood there for a while brushing the flour off her arms, giving me the old evil eye. She probably thought I wanted to run off with the cash register or something. Although I wasn't feeling too hungry, I gave her a break and bought a couple of jelly donuts. After that I left the store and walked into the center of town.

There wasn't too much action around here, though. A couple of people stood on the corner with their backs to the wind, waiting for a bus, and in the Checkered Cab office I noticed the dispatcher staring through the window while he drank a cup of coffee. His eyes were red-rimmed, and he

kept rubbing the side of his face with his hand. Across the street a cop stood in front of The Corner Cigar Store, wearing a black poncho that was flapping all over the place. I usually stop at the Cigar Store for a News, but this morning I walked up the block to the bank and stepped in out of the wind. I stayed there for a while looking up and down the street and eating my jelly donuts.

Finally the cop moved out of the doorway in my direction, so I left the bank and set out for school. I crossed the lawn in front of the Borough Hall, went past the Library, and walked north into the wind for five blocks until I reached the park. By the time I got there, it had started to sleet a little, and the park looked very dismal--with all these old wooden benches along the walks, and the rain and snow blowing underneath the trees. It was cold as a bastard, and when I began to feel the dampness soaking through the soles of my shoes, I raced over the bridge across the brook and ran up the hill on the other side of town. From up there I could just hear the traffic on the pike, the horns beeping in the distance. Then I turned on Fairview and went the last few blocks to school.

The school is one of those big old square brick buildings with four wooden pillars by the front entrance. The pillars used to be painted white, but now the paint has nearly worn off, and the wood is cracked and rotten underneath. Near the bottom they're also pretty well scarred up

with hearts and initials and a lot of curse words. Now and then one of the janitors goes to work filling in some of the worst with plastic wood, but even if one of the kids doesn't come back and clean out the letters the next night, you can see plain as day that it still says, "fuck you, Wilson" to the principal.

The place didn't look too cozy with the snow and rain beating down on it. All the windows in the building are tall and narrow, and on the first floor they're covered with iron bars or thick wire screens. Oh, they want you to come inside now and then all right, but only at the right time. It's sort of a warfare, I guess. Once a couple of guys I know broke in at night and turned on all the faucets in the third floor boy's room. When Wilson arrived the next day, the water was trickling down the stairs. Now he gets back at us by patrolling the front hall early in the morning, and nobody is allowed into the building until all the teachers have arrived--even if it's raining outside.

Because I knew there was no use fooling around the main entrance, I walked to the rear of the building to try the door by the gym. Usually, if any of the guys get in the building, they leave a stick in one of the doors for anyone who wants to follow. But this morning the door was locked. By now I was getting pretty wet, and I decided to walk all the way around the gym to the boy's locker room to see if anybody was in there. This is located underground, and I

had to get on my hands and knees and peer through the wet grating into the window-well. It was dark down there, and the water was going drip, drip, drip as it dropped from the grating onto the leaves and papers packed at the bottom. I strained my ears to catch some sound from the locker room, but for a long time there was nothing. Then someone coughed. It was faint, and I couldn't shout out yet, because I couldn't be sure if it was the janitor or not. Finally two people began talking. It sounded like Argenti and Hayden, and I decided to take a chance.

"Hey, Argenti," I called softly. There was no answer. I called louder, "Argenti, is that you down there?"

This time the window flew up, and Argenti stuck his head out right beneath me.

"Why didn't one of you guys leave a stick in the doorway for crissakes?" I said.

"What the hell do you want?" Argenti asked. He was looking up at me with this cute grin on his face. His hair may be curly, but he's one of these real tough Italian bastards who can be a pain in the ass at times.

"Go around and open up the door," I said. "I'm getting soaked out here."

His head drew back from the window, and I heard him say to Hayden, "Decker claims he's getting wet out there." Hayden laughed and they talked a little before Argenti's head stuck out again. "Okay," he said, banging the window down.

I got off my hands and knees and went around to the back door, and stuck my face up to the glass. After a few minutes Hayden appeared on the stairs. He stopped, put his finger to his mouth, and cocked his head to one side as though he was listening for something. In the dim light his face was pale, just a round blob with a little chin, and two small eyes below colorless eyebrows. He was making a big show about being real stealthy too, shrinking around on the stairs in order to fool the enemy passing in the corridors overhead. That's the way Hayden is; the kid tries to be a big actor about everything. I was getting impatient, however, and I began banging on the door with the palms of my hands.

"Hey, Hayden, don't take all day, goddamnit!"

As soon as I started banging, Hayden disappeared off the stairs. He's really nuts about this spying around corridors. When we were kids he was the same way--always after you to go to the five and dime and play drop the handkerchief. In those days his weakness was small flashlights; he was always trying to sell you a pen light or a special streamlined pocket light which just fitted the hand. He used to raid Demmy's hardware store for the gang, and he kept us supplied with baseballs, penknives and more flashlights. One day a couple of years ago I went up into the woods with him, and he pulled out a suitcase stocked with cameras, silverware, binoculars, cigarette lighters, automobile

accessories, cuff links, tie clasps, hunting knives and a couple of small pistols. He dragged the suitcase into a clearing, and we sat around all afternoon lighting cigarettes, snapping pictures, and sweeping the sky with the binoculars. A few months later Hayden got picked up by the cops for house breaking and had to go to juvenile court. As a matter of fact, he gave me a silver cigarette case, but I was afraid someone would ask me where I got it, and, in the end, I threw it down a sewer.

Suddenly Hayden was back on the stairs. This time he came right up and opened the door. "That was real smart, Decker, pounding on the door like that. Didn't you see me tell you to be quiet? Wilson just patrolled this end of the building."

He started back toward the locker room, and I closed the door and went down the stairs after him. At the bottom we turned into the narrow corridor that slants down under the gym. It was dark here, but Hayden raced ahead of me down to the red bulb over the metal fire door.

He had the door opened when I reached him, and we went through into the passageway crammed with steam pipes from the furnace room. The air was warm and smelled ashy. Hayden grabbed hold of my arm and put his lips up to my ear. "Watch out for Block!" he whispered. Block is the janitor who has a lot of fingers missing from his hands. I figured he was probably asleep in his chair by the furnace, and there wasn't

much chance of him catching us. Really Hayden didn't even have to whisper, because the generators and the blowers were making a terrific noise. They got louder and louder as we approached the end of the passageway. When we reached the furnace room door, I didn't see how Block could stand it. The generators crackled with about a million volts, and the blowers had a steady kind of roar that blasted the ear drums.

By this time Hayden was having a goddamn orgy of slyness. He had his back to the wall and was slowly inching one eye closer and closer to the point where he could look in the furnace room. I couldn't stand the noise, though, so I darted by him and ran up the stairs into the rear of the locker room.

In a few seconds Hayden came in behind me. "Geez, Decker," he said. "What the hell are ya trying to do? Don't ya know how to work anything? He walked over to one of the lockers and, grabbing one of the metal doors which was open, smashed it shut. He's a skinny little bastard, but he likes to make dramatic gestures like that.

The locker room is never very well lighted. It's below ground, and it has only two small yellow bulbs in the ceiling. The place is cold, and during the winter the shower water never dries off the cement floor. Today it was really dank. It reminded me a little of Dumont Pool near the end of the afternoon when all the kids used to stand around on

soggy towels with their lips turning blue.

Hayden and I stepped over a couple of benches and walked between a row of dark green lockers. In one of the shower stalls a faucet was dripping, and I smelled the place where all the guys piss down the drain. When we entered the boy's room, the light was suddenly blinding. There were two rows of fluorescents in the ceiling, and a separate bulb gleamed over each one of the wash basins. The light was terribly bright, because it was reflecting off the shiny white tiles that covered the floor and walls.

Argenti leaned against one of the wash basins, reading the News. He had a cigarette in his mouth, and he was wearing a pair of dark aviator's glasses. He's a pretty handsome guy, I guess, with a straight nose and a big chin. But there's something reckless or maybe even crazy about his face. His eyes are a little mad, anyway, and he smiles too much with these big black teeth. These days he was sporting long hair and sideburns.

"Hey, Decker," he said. "You were getting pretty wet out there, huh?"

"Yeah. Christ, you got plenty of lights on here."

"You don't look so wet to me," Argenti said, smiling.

I walked over and spit in a toilet bowl. "Gimme a cigarette, will ya Argenti?"

"Sure," he said, reaching into his shirt pocket and handing me a weed.

Then he lit a match, and I started my first butt of the day. The smoke went right down to my bowels, and my insides started to come to life. I absolutely need a cigarette to get me going in the morning, but the trouble is I never know if I'm headed up or down.

"What a rotten day," I said.

"Cold as hell out," Argenti replied.

"What happened to you guys last night?" I asked.

"Stritter and me were lookin' for you all over the place."

"We went to the movies," Hayden said.

"So did we. Where did you guys go?"

"We saw some lousy picture down in Newark."

"The show wasn't too hot--was it George?" Argenti said.

"No, not too hot," Hayden said, "but we had a pretty good time anyway."

"Why? What happened?" I asked.

"We just drove around a little."

Argenti had stopped reading the paper, so I went over and picked it up off the wash basin and began to thumb through it.

"What's so great about that?"

"Nothin'," Hayden said.

"Go ahead, tell him, George," Argenti said.

"Should I really?"

"Yeah. Go ahead."

"Naw, you tell him."

"Okay," Argenti said. "You know Greentree, don't you, Decker?"

"Yeah, I know him." I stopped reading.

"How do you tell somebody this, George?" Argenti was smiling quite a bit now.

"Just tell him," Hayden said. "A guy's got a right to know. Just tell him his chick has gone back on him."

"Okay. Your chick has gone back on you, Decker."

I kind of thought they would come out with something like that, but I kept looking at my newspaper. A couple of months before I had caught Toby with Greentree down in Newark. It was late on a Sunday afternoon, and I had come out of the movies and was walking up the street to the bus stop. You know how depressed you can feel right after seeing a mediocre picture, especially if you have a slight headache and the streets are all deserted. Well, I was just crossing Dean Street, and I happened to glance over at the opposite corner. There were Toby and Greentree holding hands and window shopping in front of a jewelry store.

"So you guys saw Toby and Greentree at the movies. So what! So she was out fooling around a little," I said. I started looking down at the paper again, but really I felt pretty nervous.

"We saw them in the movies," Argenti said. "And we followed 'em around in George's car for a while."

"That's right. Greentree has a car, doesn't he."

"Yeah, he's pretty rich," Hayden said.

"I guess you guys didn't see too much, just..." Here my voice got hoarse so I put the paper down, and turned on the water tap, and leaned over for a drink. While I still had my face down in the basin, I cleared my throat real loud. "I mean, I guess you didn't see too much just following them around in the car."

"We just followed 'em around for a while," Hayden said.

"Christ, you mean you lost interest?" I said. I tried to smile but my stomach was all nervous. I had forgotten the way I felt the last time. Only then I didn't know for sure what happened, and she told me they hadn't done anything.

"They went up to Toby's house, so we stopped tailing them."

"That's too bad. I wouldn't mind knowing what these other guys were getting."

"Do you really mean that?" Argenti asked.

"Go ahead, tell him," Hayden said. "I'd want somebody to tell me."

"What the hell do you know? You ain't foolin' around with any women."

"That's what you think, buddy."

"Gimme another cigarette, will ya, Argenti?" Argenti took the pack out of his pocket and passed it to me. Then he and Hayden took one.

"I'd kind of like to know what they did," I said.

"This might have bothered me three or four months ago, but since then I've just been out for what I can get. You guys know I wouldn't stick around without getting anything!"

"You're full a crap, Decker," Argenti said.

"What did he do?" I asked. "Did he feel her up or something? Do you think I never got any of that?"

"I guess he did. Don't you think so, Argenti?" Hayden was grinning like a bastard.

"Yeah. They fooled around in the kitchen for a while, but after that I guess he did."

"What the hell could they do in the kitchen?" I asked.

"They were eating some cake. Weren't they George?" Argenti said. "You check me and make sure I get all this stuff right."

Hayden smiled back at him and nodded.

"They were eating some cake," Argenti said. "Then Greentree couldn't finish his, so Toby picked up the pieces and put them in his mouth."

"She always was a phony," I said, trying hard not to shout.

"Well, that's all they did in the kitchen--just stuff like that."

"So, I guess after that they went out into the living room, huh?" I was getting more and more nervous and excited, but even though I felt like some kind of a pervert, I still wanted to know just what happened. I didn't care if it

killed me.

"We couldn't see much while they were in the living room, because right away Greentree turned out the light, and they laid down on the couch."

"That's a soft couch too. Many is the hour I spent there."

"I bet you have," Hayden said sarcastically.

"You can't see much from the window when anyone's laying down," Argenti continued.

"I guess you could tell what they were doing, though, huh?"

"Naw, not when they was laying down."

"I suppose when they got up, Greentree was pretty busy zipping up the old fly and everything."

"Yeah."

"He was? No kidding? Christ, I thought I was the only one got that stuff."

"Then he ran his hands all over her body," Hayden said.

"Goddamnit, Hayden, you're a horny little bastard, aren't you?" I let out this hoarse kind of laugh, and grabbed him by the throat, and slammed him up against the wall. "What shall we do with him, Argenti?"

"Aw, leave the kid alone."

"Let's throw him in the shower."

"Alright. Let's cool him off," Argenti said.

I snatched the cigarette out of Hayden's mouth and

threw it on the floor. Then I grabbed him around the neck and held him until Argenti came up and grabbed a hold of his legs. Argenti had a fairly tough time, because he still had his cigarette in his mouth, and there was so much smoke gathering around the lenses of his dark glasses he could hardly tell where Hayden was kicking.

"Let's stuff his head in a toilet bowl," I suggested.

"No," Hayden yelled. "C'mon you guys, cut out the kidding around. What the hell are you sore about, Decker. I didn't do nothin' to you."

Hayden got a foot loose and managed to shove it in Argenti's stomach.

"Goddamnit, George," Argenti yelled, "I'm really getting mad now." Argenti got a good grip on Hayden's legs this time, and we managed to pull him out into the locker room. After we got him fairly close to the shower, though, he really began struggling again.

"C'mon you bastards," he shouted. "I didn't do nothin' to you guys."

"Shut up, Hayden," I said. "You wanna get Wilson down here?"

"Yeah," he yelled. "Wilson! Wilson!"

He wrenched his body around so I lost my grip on his head and let him slip most of the way down to the floor. At the same instant he got one of his feet free and started banging it up against the side of a locker.

"Jesus, hold on to him, Argenti, or they'll hear us."

"I'm trying to," Argenti said, "but he's a muscular little bastard."

"Aw forget it," I said. "The hell with it. I don't want to throw him in the shower."

Argenti let go of Hayden's other foot, and I let him fall the rest of the way to the cement. He lay there for a while, and Argenti and I sat down on one of the benches to get back our wind.

"C'mon, George," I said, "Get up off the floor."

"Go to hell."

"C'mon, Hayden." Argenti said. "You got my goddamn pants dirty with your goddamn feet."

"Tough," Hayden said. Finally he jumped up from the floor, brushed himself off, and walked back to the boy's room.

"What a laugh, heh?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I gotta get cleaned up too," Argenti said. He left his seat and followed Hayden.

I sat there feeling a little sick after the long struggle with Hayden; my throat burned and my chest felt tight, but the real trouble was a terribly jumpy feeling in my stomach. When I put my hand up to rub my forehead, it actually shook a little like an old man's. I kept thinking about Toby putting cake in Greentree's mouth, and

then the other scenes would start, and I'd flip them over nervously. I'd think of Greentree laying on top of Toby, for example, before going on to some really lousy things.

I got up and walked around the room for a while. There were about ten rows of lockers, and I went down one row and up the next. It quieted me down a little, because the place was cold and dark and fitted in with my mood pretty well. When I had paced down all the aisles, I wandered back toward the showers where it was really black.

It was a little like being in one of my dreams. I could hear Argenti and Hayden walking back and forth in the boy's room, and, gradually, as I listened to their feet scuffling over the tiles, it sounded like a lot of people talking and walking around and running the water.

I was pretty hungry and tired, and nervous and depressed from smoking cigarettes, and every time I thought about Toby, I felt weak and jumpy inside. I remembered one night when we were lying on the couch on her side porch. It was in the fall, and the wind was blowing the leaves right off the lawn and scraping them across the flagstones. That was the first time I ever really got anywhere. We had been going around together all fall, and she had her hair cut short, and everyone realized how pretty she was. She doesn't have a sensational body or anything--as a matter of fact, she's fairly thin--but she isn't as conceited as all the other babes in school. If she wants you to touch something,

she puts your hand right on it. Some girls really look sexy, but they act disgusted if you brush against them by mistake. Toby is just the opposite, though. She hardly wears any lipstick and she's always kidding me about being so horny, but I'm sure I could get into her if I wanted to. I probably could have that night on the side porch and plenty of other times. I wish I did now. Maybe Greentree had been giving it to her for months.

With that crummy thought I left the showers, and walked back to the door of the boy's room, and looked inside. In spite of all the smoke in the air, the twin tubes in the ceiling were still quite brilliant. At first Hayden and Argenti were simply two dark blobs revolving in a brightly lighted white box. Eventually, though, one of the blobs stopped moving, opened a window, and the other became Hayden in the process of ripping away a paper towel. There was the usual loud, hollow bang and click from the metal towel container.

"You guys are going to have the janitor up here pretty soon if you don't stop making so damn much noise," I told them.

Hayden dried his hands and looked at me with a pained expression on his face. "What the hell are you so sore about, Decker?" He wadded up the towel and threw it in the toilet. Then he kicked the handle, and the water came rushing down through the pipes with a loud roar.

"Jesus, Hayden," I said, "how would you like your head pushed in?"

"Try it," he said.

Argenti opened the window a little further, put his head out, and looked up through the grating. "Look at it coming down," he said.

Suddenly the rain seemed to be falling harder. I could hear the drops hitting the leaves in the window well, and the water was trickling in the drains.

"Is it still snowing, too?" I asked.

"Yeah," Argenti replied.

At that moment a door slammed behind me, there were footsteps, and someone grabbed me real hard just above the elbow.

"Alright, Mr. Mass," Wilson's voice said, "you check the locker room; I've got these jokers."

Wilson's hand gave me the usual sinking and yet enraged feeling. Ever since I was a little kid people have been jumping on me like that. I remember a couple of years ago I went to the movies, and I got this real deep gash in my arm when the paper cup dispenser broke. I was pretty bewildered, and I wandered around the men's room spurting blood all over the floor. By the time the manager caught me, I was trying to clean up the mess with paper towels as best I could, but the silly bastard said I was drunk and called the cops anyway.

Well, as soon as I realized who it was pushing me through the door of the boy's room, I yanked my arm away and yelled, "Don't grab me, mister; you're not allowed to grab anybody!"

"Alright," Wilson said, "just don't any of you kids try to get away before I put your names down."

While he was writing our names in his book, I leaned one shoulder against the wall and tried to get as relaxed as possible. I crossed my arms and gave him this real cool look. He has this brownish freckled skin and always wears rimless glasses and wrinkled shirt collars. Although he pretended it didn't bother him, anyone could see he was angry. He really can't take it unless you look worried as hell. Argenti was smiling at the rain as if it was a joke outside, and Hayden had begun polishing his shoes with a paper towel.

"What makes you guys think you're any different from anybody else, heh?" Wilson asked. "I see the same crew here that I always see: Argenti, Hayden, Decker."

"Don't always put my name first, will ya?" Argenti said.

Wilson stopped writing for a moment and looked at him. "That's kind of a funny thing to worry about, isn't it?"

"I'm not worried about anything else," Argenti said. Turning away from the window, he looked at the principal. "I just don't want my name first. Why does it always have

to be first?"

Mr. Mass entered through the door and stood in back of Wilson. "No one else in the locker room," he said.

"Well, we caught these three anyway. Breaking into the school, making a commotion in the locker room, smoking in the lavatory--"

"You didn't see anybody smoking," Argenti interrupted.

"I don't have to see anybody smoking," Wilson said. "I can smell the smoke in the air, and I can see the cigarette butts on the floor."

Mass leaned down, picked up a cigarette butt, and handed it to him.

"You don't know whether we put that there or not," I said. "Maybe someone was in here after school last night."

"Is this yours, Hayden?" Wilson asked.

"No sir," Hayden shook his head, "not mine."

Wilson looked at Argenti and me, but we just stared back at him.

"I suppose all of you deny everything--that you're even here at all! Well how would you like me to expel the three of you?"

"On what charge?" I asked. I could see he was trying to build up a big case.

"Smoking on school property would be enough. Don't you thing so, Mr. Mass?"

"I certainly do," he replied.

"Listen, Mr. Wilson," I shouted. "You have to catch us smoking. You have to catch us with the cigarettes in our hands."

"Alright, now, Decker. Don't start shouting at me. You know I won't stand for that."

"Well I don't want to be accused of something I never did!"

"Mr. Wilson, will you answer me something? Will ya?" Argenti asked.

"I'm not going to engage in any lengthy discussions with you boys."

"But you gotta," I shouted. "You can't accuse us without at least talking things over."

"Mr. Wilson, why is it," Argenti continued, "why is it that ever since I been a freshman you've had it in for me?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Argenti, we've been bending over backwards on your account for years."

"Bending over backwards? Are you kidding? The last time I was in the guidance department, they showed me a folder full a comments about what I did since I came to this school."

"We keep a file on all the students. The record you make here can either help or hinder you; it's up to you."

"He don't need that kind a help, Mr. Wilson," Hayden said.

"Alright, now!" Wilson said angrily. He slammed his

book shut and jammed it into his coat pocket. "As I told you before, I'm not going to stand around all day talking things over. I'm pretty certain that you boys were smoking cigarettes down here, and I also think you might be the ones who have been stealing things out of the lockers. I haven't caught any of you yet, but if I do, you punks will be bounced out of here so fast it'll make your head swim!"

"You're trying to catch us before we do anything!" I yelled back at him. "You can't go around calling people crooks and punks."

Mr. Mass stared stern as hell at me. "Quiet down, Decker."

"Tell me the truth--quickly!" Wilson said. "Were any of you smoking on school property this morning?"

"No!" I said, almost believing myself.

Argenti and Hayden shook their heads.

"Then I'm not going to hold you accountable for that. But for breaking into the school this morning, you'll have to report to Mr. Mass for five hours detention."

"Can't you give us some other kind of punishment?" I asked. "I work every day after school."

"You know we don't make any exceptions about that. Working after school is a privilege. If you don't behave, I'll have your papers revoked anyway."

"Now, is everything clear?" Wilson said before he turned to go.

"Yeah," Argenti answered.

"And don't forget, because that will certainly make matters very serious."

He stood looking at us for a long time until I finally said, "Alright." Then he and Mr. Mass walked out.

As soon as their footsteps died away, Hayden said, "Christ, I hate that bastard."

"Go to hell, Hayden, you didn't say much a little while ago."

"He's probably the one who's been robbing the lockers too," Argenti said.

"Goddamnit," I yelled. "What the hell did I have to come to school today for anyhow?"

I walked over to the row of toilets and slammed the door on the first booth. It shut with a tremendous hollow BONG! Then I slammed the second door. When I get mad like this, I want to murder myself, or gouge out my eyes. "Goddamnit! Goddamnit! Goddamnit!" I shouted and smacked my head. "Gimme a knife and I'll cut my heart out." Then I got a hold of myself and laughed so Argenti and Hayden would think it was all a gag. "What a joke, heh, you guys?"

"Don't blow your top, Decker," Argenti told me.

"Ah, hell," I said, "this will probably cost me my job at the five and dime. The manager isn't gonna let me come in an hour late five days in a row."

"Tell 'em what happened," Argenti said, "everybody gets

in a jam once in a while."

"What's the use; I'm gonna quit school anyway. I'm sick and tired of all their crap. It'll be a long time before I'll report for five hours of detention."

"Christ, that's nothin'," Hayden said. "I had over sixty straight hours last year."

"Why did ya stand for it?" I asked. "What made ya take it?"

"You gotta have a diploma nowadays. You can't get anywhere without it."

Then the first bell rang, and right away we could hear the halls overhead filling up with students. The building seemed to shake a little, and a whole bunch of guys came pounding down the stairs to one side of the locker room, banged the hall door open, and ran by. One kid stopped by the door, though, and stared at us. "How did you guys get in here so fast?"

"We came in through the tunnel, you jerk," I yelled after him. But he had gone off into the locker room where everyone was screaming at each other and crashing the metal locker doors.

"I guess I'll go upstairs for a while," I said.

Argenti had taken off his sun glasses and was polishing them with a piece of toilet paper. He and Hayden nodded as I went out the door.

I walked to the end of the corridor and started climbing the stairs. On each one of the landings there was a window I could look out of. The rain seemed to have turned almost completely into snow, and was falling in large damp flakes. A lot of the kids that passed me seemed fairly excited about the weather and crowded to the window for a quick look.

"Is it sticking yet?" a girl asked.

Any fool could see it wasn't.

I climbed higher and higher up the stairs, and the windows on the landings began to give a wider and wider view of the valley. When I reached the top floor, which was higher than the tallest tree in the school yard, I could look out over the whole town. The snow was emptying out of the sky, sweeping down on rows of little houses and wet streets. I felt old because I didn't care about the snow any more.

I stood there staring out of the window for a fairly long time. It was pretty cold at first, as there were so many people streaming by with dripping raincoats and boots on. After the early rush let up, though, the radiator underneath the window cracked and began to give off a warm dusty smell. I stood there just watching the snow drop into a row of trees that lined the edge of the school grounds.

Then I got this scared feeling. Suddenly I realized the noise in the halls had died out, and I looked around

and saw that everyone had gone to their classes. I couldn't see how I had missed the warning bell, although it must have sounded.

My first thought was to run like mad for first period class, only I remembered that Z., my English teacher, had this drive on. The guy had become a fanatic on the subject of not forgetting to bring your books to class. Of course, I had forgotten to get mine out of my locker before I came upstairs.

I couldn't decide whether to run for my books and take a chance on being late or whether to go directly to class and hope Z. wouldn't call on me. What was the matter with me? I had gotten to school almost an hour early. I was one of the first students in the building, and now this had happened.

Without actually knowing I had decided to try for the books, I found myself running back down the stairs. The unbelievable way everything seemed to be going wrong made me want to smash my feet down and jar the whole damn building to pieces. I went crashing down flight after flight, but just as I reached the bottom of the last flight, the late bell rang!

It's funny how I had begun to feel like a criminal. Although I tried to laugh at the thought of Wilson's face when Z. sent me to see him, I really wasn't too successful. I could feel the anger and resentment inside me like powder

getting ready to blow me up. I picked my nose and bit my finger and ran my hands through my hair over and over. I was in so damn deep there didn't seem to be any reason for staying in school any longer.

This thought made me feel a little better, until, above me, I heard someone coming down the stairs.

Because I was so nervous and feeling guilty and all, right away I started back up the stairs as if I was heading directly to class. I had only taken a few steps, though, when the person coming down appeared on the landing. It was Toby.

She looked pretty shocked. She stopped and almost cringed against the wall, and her mouth dropped open and her fingers went up to her lower lip. She looked so worried and nervous that anybody could tell she was putting it on. The little bitch is really quite stupid.

I walked right up to her and grabbed her as hard as I could by the arm. "What's the matter with you?" I said. "What the hell are you looking at?" I shook her a little and pushed her off the landing. She went down a few steps, caught her balance, and stood looking afraid of me. I tried to make this real superior actor's face. It didn't seem to come off so hot, however. I felt my lip twitch a few times, but I probably never should have tried such a rotten movie trick. As I climbed out of sight, I had the feeling she was looking at my back, and I pretended to be going to the

electric chair.

When I reached the top floor, I wandered out into the hall in the general direction of English class. I thought I might go right on through to the side entrance, but I turned the corner and was really startled to see Z.'s door open. There was so much loud talking going on, it was possible Z. hadn't even gotten to class yet. I dashed down to the door and looked inside.

Z. was just clipping his old fashioned glasses onto his big nose in preparation for saying something really great to a little circle of ass kissers. His desk is on a platform in the front of the room, and three or four girls and one fruity character had climbed right up there with him. Most of the other kids were shouting or wandering around, and across the room a couple of guys were pretending to throw their friend out of the window.

I thought I could probably get away with anything in all that confusion, so I strolled over to my desk and sat down. I was sure Z. hadn't noticed me, either, until this fart face named Moosh called out, "Heh, Decker, where you been all this time?" Of course, Z. glanced up and saw me.

Moosh's calling out like that kind of flattened me. Then Johnny Brightman, this friend of mine, leaned over and whispered, "Geeze, I understand you guys got sixty hours detention!" He put his lips right up to my ear, so that his voice was hot and sounded awed.

"Five hours," I said in an exasperated way. "Five hours!"

"I'll see you there, buddy."

I didn't bother to answer him. The room was hot, and I felt a little sick and sweaty from running up and down the stairs. As a matter of fact, my nerves were shot. And it seemed only a question of time before Z. would finish and charge me with something else.

Z. was still busy in the front of the room, however. He was talking away with his eyes shut and his hands clasped in front of him like a priest. I was glad I didn't have to listen to him; he could sweep you up and leave you wondering what he had been talking about. At the moment he was concentrating so hard, he didn't even see Moosh send Brightman smashing through the desks onto the floor at my feet.

Right then I thought I might vomit. I slumped over, put my head on my arms, and tried to think of something else.

For some reason, I started thinking about the English teacher we had the year before--this guy named Kean who always wore bow ties. The first thing we ever pulled on Kean was the old frog noise. Right in the middle of one of his lectures, Moosh put his face down close to his desk and went: "Beep." It's a low sound you make in the back of the throat. You only have to open your lips a crack so that it's very hard to trace.

Of course, Stritter, this other guy I know--that was before he got kicked out of school--made a couple of "beeps" from the other side of the room too. Each time one of the noises came, Kean blinked and frowned, but you could see the poor bastard didn't know what to do about it. He blinked and talked faster, but he didn't see us. He didn't really look at us! Finally one of the guys tried a soft rooster call. And when he got away with that, it only took a few seconds for a whole barnyard to develop. It was really a riot. Each time some kid thought up a new sound--you really had to rack your brains after a while--it seemed brilliant! I remember when the bell rang, we all leaped out of our seats and screamed and threw papers in the air.

It made me feel a little better just thinking about it.

Later on, though, Kean made the mistake of changing Moosh's seat to the back of the room--I think he was trying to forget all about him. For two or three weeks after that, at a certain time, Moosh would pull his prick out. Kean must have been blind not to have seen him!

Somehow, Wilson found out about it, and he excused the girls and came into the class to give the boys a lecture. You could tell at the start he was using the old honor approach--suppose it was your sister? Then he ended up by suggesting we'd never be able to get a job, by threatening to call the cops, and by telling Moosh if he ever pulled

his penis out of his pants again, he'd have him committed to an asylum.

Things really fell apart with certain teachers. A lot of guys got into trouble because of Kean. It was his fault, as a matter of fact, that Stritter was finally expelled from school for good. And in a class like his you never knew why one guy got it instead of another. Why not that fat slob Moosh, for example? The reason is Stritter let everyone know he wasn't afraid, while Moosh was always yellow. Also, of course, Stritter looks like such a spy. He has this thin body and a long face like a horse.

But Z. was different; you knew if you were wise in his class, he wouldn't mind getting rid of you. Sometimes, of course, the class got out of control, but those times he had a way of making it seem like a joke he had planned anyway. And besides that, Z. was fairly honest. When we read Tom Sawyer, he really seemed to think the school teacher was pretty funny. He always acted like he wasn't on the side of the school at all. "We need a revolution here!" he'd yell at us.

Z. also had a lot of strange ideas and interesting side lights on the authors. He told us, for example, how Mark Twain probably hated his old man (most teachers never would have admitted such a thing was possible), and how Twain looked through the keyhole and saw the doctors cutting up his old man's body. Then when he mentioned that Twain's

wife made him take all the dirty words out of Huck Finn, you felt Z. would just have soon left them in.

Z. also told one kid that Huck and Jim were a couple of homos. I bet there's something to it, too. I certainly felt embarrassed while Huck and Jim were laying around naked on the raft, and Jim kept putting his arms around Huck and calling him "honey." The queer jigs are the same way in Newark at this bar I often go to--always trying to get close to you as though there was some understanding.

Z. could almost always get a rise out of the class with some of his ideas. I never talked to him alone, but I remember the time we were reading The Call of the Wild, and he kept asking the class what the title of the book meant. One of the girls finally suggested that it was the sound Buck was always hearing deep in the forest. Then Z. asked us if we ever heard the call of the wild. Right away Moosh raised his hand and said he used to get it quite a bit during the football games. Z. asked him what it sounded like. Moosh said it was the roar of the crowd chanting other people's names which made him want to kill somebody. Z. said that wouldn't be any worse than a lot of other stupid things that Moosh had pulled! Z. had a smile on his face so that you couldn't be absolutely sure whether he was referring to that other incident or not. How could he have heard about it?

That's the way it was with Z.; he seemed to be in and

around you at the same time. He might be hard to understand, but now and then he made you feel he knew all about everybody and everything! He had read Mad Comics and he had seen all the movies. "Fools," he would shout in a joking way, "fools, learn the facts of life! They're closing down on you. The Citizen Committees have taken Mad Comics off the newsstands already!"

Just then Z. finished talking to the kids in the front of the room, and he started tapping his desk. "Get in your own seat. Everybody, quiet!"

Then he walked down to my desk. "I'll see you after school today, Decker, for being late for class."

"I can't make it," I blurted out.

"Why not?"

"I gotta stay for Mr. Mass in detention."

"Alright, I'll see you tomorrow."

"I can't make it then either," I said.

A couple of guys started to "haw-haw."

"Okay, how about Monday?"

"Nope, I'm afraid not," I said, and smiled at everyone.

Z. raised his arms and let them slap down at his sides. "When will you be available, wise guy?" He leaned over and pulled his lips up in a real evil smile.

"In five days," I said, looking at his large teeth.

"All right!" Z. turned and walked to the front of the room. "I'll see you every day after you're through with Mass."

"Yeah?" I muttered, "don't count on it." It's possible Z. might have heard me, but he didn't answer. Instead he picked up his marking book and drew a big O.

It made me want to change my name.

"What's that for?" I shouted.

"You forgot your book today, didn't you?"

"I didn't forget it, Mr. Z.! I was robbed! Is it my fault somebody busted into my locker and took all my books? They even robbed a new pair of sneakers. Ask anybody, they'll tell you I'm telling the truth."

"Decker, you become less like Tom Sawyer every day. Don't you know how American boys are supposed to act? Don't you know you're supposed to have a good side too?" Z. strode down the aisle to Brightman. "Isn't that right, Brightman?"

"I guess everybody has some good in them," Brightman said.

"There's a safe answer. C'mon, Brightman, you know Tom Sawyer had a lot of good in him. Didn't he show up alive at his own funeral, like Christ arising from the dead? Don't tell me you see Bobo Decker in the role of Jesus Christ!"

"Maybe not that," Moosh called out, "but I can see Decker taking some babe down into those caves."

All the guys gave the phony laugh at that remark.

"Haw-haw."

"Listen," I shouted above the laughter, "I am like Tom Sawyer! I am! Don't I hate school and all teachers!" I probably went a little too far with that, but Z. was getting on my nerves. And after all, what the hell did I care about Jesus Christ?

"Heh, Jack," somebody called out, "I get the part of the sick A-rab dyed blue!"

"I wanna be Hop-Frog!" someone else yelled.

"Yeah, that's some part!"

"QUIET!" Z. bellowed. "You idiots have gotten off the subject. Let's at least get back to the same book. Moosh, I think you were on the right track. I see Decker down in the cave too; only instead of Tom Sawyer, he's Injun Joe. And the handy thing about that part, Decker, is that it's really two roles in one. Don't forget you get to be the deaf and dumb Spaniard too."

"What about that zero you wrote in your marking book a minute ago, Mr. Z.?"

"I like this!" Z. roared. "I tell you what, Decker. You come in tomorrow wrapped in a serape, wearing bushy white whiskers, long white hair, a sombrero and green goggles, and I'll take away the zero!"

"Can I be excused for a minute?" I shouted.

Z. looked at me closely for a moment. "What's the matter kid, you're all nervous today."

"Listen, Mr. Z.," I said, "everybody has been jumping

on me this morning. I told you my locker was robbed and it made me late for class--so you started in on me."

"Get smart! sonny. Calm down a little!"

"Do you mind if I go to the bathroom," I said. "I really have to go."

"Okay, Decker," Z. said, finally. "Get out of here."

I jumped up from my seat, walked into the hall, and slammed the door behind me.

All the classroom doors were shut, and the hall was empty. I didn't know how I could have gone so crazy with Z.. I knew he was strict and I hated him for it. No, I guess, I admired him a little too--although he certainly couldn't like me. Could he?

I started walking down the empty corridor with my heels clicking on the concrete floor, and I remembered I had dreamed about Z. that night. In my dream I had come upon Z. in a slummy section of New York. I didn't really stumble into him; I have the feeling I might have been tailing him all night through a whole lot of cheap joints and all-night cafeterias. Z. is dressed in an old Ike jacket, peg-top pants and alligator shoes. I follow him up the deserted early morning street, and he walks in the middle of the trolley tracks, because he knows there won't be any cars for a while. (I imagine the city looked the same to my father when he worked the grave yard shift and sometimes

missed the last bus.) Suddenly, Z. leaves the street and runs into a subway. I follow him downstairs but don't see him in the long passageway. Then I hear the trains rumble deep underground, and I know he is gone.

Sometimes just remembering a dream will make you feel better, but this time I found myself still pretty nervous. I had butterflies in my stomach, and, yet, I also felt sleepy. I had to be careful about wandering around the halls too; if one of the monitors caught me, it would mean more detention. Then I found myself standing outside Toby's classroom.

Her seat was close to the door, but near the front of the room so the only way I could see her was to put my face against the pane, and even this way the wooden frame of the door cut her in half. All I could see was one thin shoulder, the back of her small bent neck, and her short bobbed hair. She was busy reading, and I knew by the way she was concentrating on the book, she wasn't worrying much about me. I didn't see how the little bitch could put on this big act on the stairway, go to her classroom and sit down and start reading a book like mad!

After a while I felt like a fool hanging around her door, though, and I walked down to the boy's room in the basement. Here it was quiet. I switched off the bright lights and stood in the dark for a while. I started out thinking about Toby, but I found myself on the dream again.

I kept thinking the dream had a scene I had lost, but whenever I tried to force myself to remember everything, I got sleepy. I opened the window in order to get some fresh air. It was still cold enough outside to see your breath, although the snow had turned to a steady rain. The drops swept in under the overhang and fell through the grating on the window well.

I stood by the window for five or ten minutes, feeling it was getting harder each second to go back to Z.'s room. Z. had given in, anyhow. He wanted me to stop shouting, but I went on shouting just the same. He wanted to keep me in the room, but I escaped, even slammed the door, and he didn't complain. Probably Z. didn't care if I returned to class at all.

After I stood there for a long time, looking out the window and feeling depressed, I began to crave a cigarette. Although I didn't have any on me, there was a large steam pipe suspended just below the ceiling where some of the guys used to hide their butts. This was located over the row of toilets, so that if you stood on the partitions between the toilets, you could slide your fingers along the top of the pipe. I climbed up and began making my way from partition to partition. At about the middle of the pipe I touched a butt, and accidentally brushed it onto the floor. I didn't want to pick it up at first. But I worked the rest of the way without finding any others, and had to go back for it.

It was dried out with a yellow stain on one end and a damp spot from the floor. I put the damn thing in my mouth anyway, and began to look through my pockets for some matches. Of course, I didn't have one goddamn match! Now that I had gotten this close, I felt like I'd probably die if I didn't actually get a few puffs. I went out into the locker room to search the open lockers on the chance there might be a stray book of matches inside one of them. The room was so dimly lit, I had to put my head right inside the lockers in order to see into every corner. This was pretty lousy, because I kept finding my nose only inches away from dusty sneakers, yellowish underpants, and cruddy old jock straps.

While I was searching, it came to me there would probably be enough time to run downtown, pick up a pack of cigarettes, and be back before the period ended. I didn't know what time it was and there wasn't a clock in the locker room, but I didn't think it could be very late. Also, I was becoming more and more exasperated with looking through the lockers. Every goddamn little bastard in the school was smoking like a fiend, but it was impossible to find one match. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I kicked over a bench, ran down the stairs into the sub-basement, passed the janitor's room, and left the school the way I had come in.

Because I wanted to get to town as soon as possible, I didn't walk around to the front of the school, but cut out across the back of the school yard. The rain was falling

steadily, and there was a wind from the north which tore through the trees at the edge of the property and drove the rain across the softball field. I turned my collar up against the wind and ran out across the infield, keeping my head down so I could dodge the puddles. It felt light running with all the wind in the air. I could hear it blow through the trees, and then I'd feel it lift me as I leaped over the puddles.

At the edge of the school yard I climbed the fence, slid down the bank, and ran across the football field to the street. Although I was still three or four blocks from town, my shoes were muddy, the water was dribbling down my face, and I felt a cold damp spot spreading across my shoulders. It was raining harder than I had expected. Unless it let up, I'd be too soaked to go back to school.

Somehow, I had fucked up again. I walked disgustedly to the center of town and stumbled into an alley that ran behind the stores. A short distance from the entrance, behind the Super Market, a large trailer truck nearly blocked off the street. I squeezed my way through the passage between the side of the truck and the greasy brick wall of the garage, and found my face smack up against the word, CALIFORNIA, printed in big letters on the shiny metal of the trailer. The whole thing read: "Shipped by the CALIFORNIA Orange Growers' Association." And then there was a list of cities: Los Angeles, Pasadena, Riverside,

San Bernardino, San Diego. The whole thing really got me; I felt so damn sad and lonely and restless, I walked around to the other side of the truck and stood under the corrugated metal roof over the loading platform, watching a couple of guys unloading the crates of oranges.

The men went back and forth in the trailer, carrying the crates to the loading platform and dumping them onto a slide which took them down into the basement. They both wore leather jackets, and one of the men had on a pair of low heeled cowboy boots. They worked quietly, their footsteps deadened by the sawdust on the floor of the trailer. I could hear the short puffs of breath as they let go the crates onto the slide, and the scrape of the wood and wire shooting into the store. Occasionally a faint voice called from the basement: "Hold up a minute."

After a while I called out to one of the men in the truck. "Heh, buddy, are you guys really from California?"

"That's right."

"How long did it take you to get here?"

" 'bout three days," he answered.

The men finished unloading, climbed into the cab, and the motor started. While it was idling, it made a high cracking noise with a powerful lower register underneath. Really I wanted to hitch a ride, but I just stood there as it pulled away. At the entrance to the alley the horn blasted once, a single, clear note that sprang up between

the buildings.

Afterwards I went up to Milton's and went in the back door.

CHAPTER TWO

Milton is one of those guys who always looks beat. His eyes are heavy-lidded and always red-rimmed. He also has this round unshaven face, and a big mop of greying hair.

I can't say exactly when it was that I discovered his store, but I guess a few of us drifted there because it was so different from the Green Acres, the big hangout for kids in our town. The Green Acres is this phony place where you always find a lot of goddamn guys running around trying to borrow a dime so they can call up their girl friends. Some eighth grader is always approaching you and saying, "Jesus, if I only had a dime now! Could I get shacked up!"

In Milton's nobody ever bothers you--except, possibly, Milton or his mother, but you never have to take them seriously. I remember one time when Jack Stritter got Argenti to walk up to the soda fountain and order a blow job. "Hey, Mrs. Milton," he shouted, "gimme a blow job--will ya?" We finally told her it was a new kind of sundae that was all the rage in town.

Later Milton found out about it and spoke to Jack. "You shouldn't talk to Mother that way," he said. "I mean supposing she found out what it meant. Ugh, what an ugly

word. Blow job, for Christ sakes!" Then he rattled the dishes angrily in the sink. "All the things I have to take in this business so as not to go bankrupt."

Milton was always experimenting with other lines in the hope of bolstering sales. Once he started something, however, he never completely gave it up. At first he just had a drug store and soda fountain, but later he added children's underwear, pots and pans, toys, practical jokes like fake dog turds, magazines, penny candy and newspapers. After a while the place got more and more dark and cluttered, and the two balls of red liquid that hung in the window got more and more cloudy. Milton also got fatter.

Finally Milton had to sell half his soda fountain and almost all his furniture. The only thing left was a round table and four wire chairs. We spent a lot of time there, drinking coffee and reading magazines. Sometimes Mrs. Milton couldn't take it, and she'd rush out from behind the counter and snatch them away. "Don't you ever buy?" she'd ask frantically.

Anyway, as I opened Milton's back door, an old cow bell rattled above me, and I clumped up the dim passage that ran to one side of the store's rear apartment.

"I'll be with you in a minute," Milton shouted out. His voice came from behind a frosted window set in the wall of the hallway. His laboratory was back there--where he filled the prescriptions--the apartment was behind that. I

looked from the back of the store to the front. Milton hadn't bothered to switch on the lights this morning, and all I could make out were the vague shapes of display racks, boxes and showcases.

"Heh, Milton," I yelled, "why don't you turn on some lights back here?"

"Who's calling please? I'll be with you in a minute."

"It's me, Decker. Are you open for business yet?"

Milton's head appeared at the door of the laboratory. "Of course, I'm open for business."

"Well, how would anyone know it?"

"My customers know I'm always open. Don't I live here for God's sake."

"Yeah, well supposing I walk into that junk pile in front of me and put out my eyes. Then you'll wish you burned a few lights."

"So, don't walk in. Walk right back out."

"C'mon, Milton, I'm freezing. Let me have a cup of coffee and a pack of cigarettes."

"Why didn't you say that's what you wanted?"

He walked toward the front of the store, and I followed him. We walked through the worst piles of shipping crates and unopened cartons and came into the fairly open magazine and soda fountain section. I noticed then that someone was sitting at the table, in the pale light from the window, looking out at the street.

"Is that you, Jack?" I asked.

"Yeah," Stritter said gloomily.

"Jack has been with me all morning," Milton said from behind the counter. "Haven't you, Jackie old boy?"

"That's right," Stritter answered.

"I thought you said last night you were going to look for a job today?"

"I was going to," Stritter said, "But I didn't feel like going around in the rain."

Milton put a cup of coffee and a pack of cigarettes down on the counter, and I reached into my pants for some money. Christ, even my pockets were cold and wet. It was a good thing the store was warm. One thing about Milton, he's not stingy about his own comfort. I always had the idea he kept the soda fountain just so he could have as much ice cream as he wanted.

"This'll just have to do," I said, handing him a wet bill.

Milton picked up the dollar between two fingers and held it out, dangling in front of him. "You'll rust my cigar box," he protested in a fake high voice and started toward the rear. Although there was a register in front, he never kept any money in it.

"Don't forget my change?" I called after him.

"You'll get it, you'll get it!" he said, and disappeared behind some packing cases.

"I'll see you when I leave," I shouted at his back. I picked up the cup of coffee and the pack of cigarettes and went over to the table and sat down with Stritter. He was still staring solemnly out of the window, his long legs thrust underneath the table, his hands in his coat pockets. Although the place was warm, he kept his overcoat buttoned with the collar up.

I lit a cigarette and began to drink the coffee. It was quiet and gloomy in the store, and I found myself staring out toward the street. There was a curtain across the lower half of the window, so that you could only see the gleaming, wet tops of the cars as they went by. Finally Stritter reached out for a cigarette from my pack. And I took the opportunity to say, "I found out where Hayden and Argenti were last night."

"You did?"

"Yeah, they were riding around after Toby. They saw her and Greentree in the movies down in Newark, and they followed them all the way to Toby's house and looked in the windows."

"What a couple of kids. How was Greentree making out?"

"I think he got in."

Stritter looked at me with a disgusted expression on his face. "Well, you don't care, do you?"

"Naw," I said, and shrugged my shoulders. And now,

somehow, I was acting so unworried that I realized it didn't matter as much as I thought it did. Of course, I must have felt something before. I tried to remember what it was like when I imagined Greentree zipping up his pants. There was a little quiver of butterflies in my stomach, but it wasn't too bad.

"Anyway," I said, trying to see things from a different side, "They might have made it all up. I don't have to believe those jokers."

"You don't." Stritter didn't seem very interested, and I couldn't tell whether he had asked a question or made a statement.

"Don't I what?"

"Don't you believe Argenti and Hayden? After all, if they were looking in the windows, they probably know what happened."

"I don't know. What's the difference?"

Suddenly Stritter straightened up and leaned across the table toward me. "Well if you don't care about all this, why the hell aren't you in school this morning!"

It made me mad that he had put his finger on something. I was embarrassed at being in Milton's. I knew now that most of the things I had done in school were a big act, but God knows I didn't at the time!

"I came down here for a pack of cigarettes!" I finally said.

"Alright, don't bother me! I don't care if you shoot Greentree and blow up the whole goddamn school."

We stopped talking for a while after that, and Stritter slumped down in his seat again. During this time I looked out the window, but no matter how hard I tried, I wasn't able to drop the subject.

I couldn't help saying, "Just the same I wouldn't mind finding out exactly what they did."

"Look!" Stritter shouted. "Don't talk to me about it. There's a phone booth in the corner. Call Toby up and ask her!"

"Okay," I said, jumping up. "I will!"

I walked over to the phone booth and began to look up the number. I had a little trouble with that, because at first I was looking for the name of the school, and the number was actually listed as one of the departments under the name of the town. By the time I found it, I had gotten pretty nervous. I have this real phobia about talking on the telephone. Then when I looked in my pockets, I discovered I didn't have any coins.

"I haven't got any change," I said to Stritter.

"You guys give me a pain! All morning I've been sitting here thinking about how I'd like to hold up a gas station or murder somebody, and then you come along with your petty problems. Get your change from Milton. He owes it to you for chrissakes."

"Don't push me, will ya, Jack!" I knew that he was putting the pressure on, but I walked back through the store to the door of the laboratory anyway. When I got there, I had to call a couple of times for Milton.

After a while his mother loomed into sight from the apartment. "Yes?"

"Milton owes me some money," I said.

"How could that be? How could my son owe you some money?"

"Don't worry, he does! Hey, Milton," I yelled, "come out here!"

' Some springs creaked in the dark room behind the laboratory, and then Milton stood in the doorway.

"That's right, Mother," he said, "I forgot to give him his change before."

His mother was horrified. "Milton! how could you do such a thing?"

"For God's sake, Mother, don't make a crime out of it."

Pulling a bill out of his pocket, he took some coins from the cigar box in the laboratory and handed them to me.

"I'm sorry, kid," he apologized.

"Forget it," I said and turned around and walked back to the front of the store. While I was gone, Stritter had gotten up from the table and had gone over to the phone booth.

"Alright," he instructed, "just call up and say you're Toby's father or brother and you have to speak to her."

"Yeah, okay!" I said. "Gimme a chance to look up the phone number again."

When I had the number, I dialed the High School. It rang a few times before a woman said, "Hello." It must have been one of the secretaries, but I didn't recognize her voice.

"Hello," I said. "I'd like to speak to Toby Williams."

"Is she a student here?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Well, I'm sorry, we're not allowed to interrupt classes to call students to the phone."

"You're not, heh."

"No we're not," she said impatiently.

"Not even if it's an emergency?"

"Who is this calling, please?"

"This is Toby's brother. I just got down from college and I have to speak to her."

"What kind of an emergency is it?" she asked.

"It's a personal emergency. I'd rather not talk about it."

"Look here, I think you better speak to the principal."

Then the phone clicked and went dead.

"Christ," I said to Stritter, "she's going to get Wilson on the phone."

"So what. Just tell him the same thing."

Then I heard a man's voice come on the other end of the line. "Doctor Wilson speaking."

"Uh, Dr. Wilson, this is Toby William's brother. I have to speak to my sister."

"I'm sorry but we can't allow that kind of thing. We'll get a message to her, and you'll have to wait for her to call you back during a free period."

"You can't get her for me now?" I asked weakly.

"No, I'm sorry--"

I didn't hear him finish, because Stritter grabbed the phone out of my hand.

"What's the trouble here," he said. "Is this the principal? Well, listen, Mr. Wilson, I'd like you to put my daughter on right away. This is her father speaking."

There was a short pause before Stritter said, "You don't believe this is her father, heh? Well listen, buddy, why don't you go screw yourself." Then he hung up.

"That's great," I said. "Who the hell do you think Wilson is going to think that was?"

"How do I know?"

"Me! That's who he's going to think it was!"

"Now, Decker, why should he think that?"

"Because he caught us smoking in the locker room this morning; that's why. And then I got into trouble in Z.'s class and walked out of school."

"You didn't say anything to me about that."

"So what," I shouted, grabbing the front of his coat. "So what if I didn't say anything to you about it. You were too busy pushing to listen to me anyway!"

Suddenly Stritter gave a wild yell, and I felt his hands grab my throat. "Goddamnit, Decker!" he shouted, "I told you not to fool around with me."

As he clutched my throat, he started forward, and his lunge drove us back onto the table, where I had one clear look at him as he came bearing down over me, his long face strange, the black eyes calm and just a small trace of white at his nostrils. The table lasted only a second, tipped beneath us. We went down toward the floor, and I felt a chair, a wire display rack spring out of the way, and then falling for a moment until my back hit bottom.

But, somehow, there didn't seem to be anything I could do about Stritter being on top of me or about his grip on my throat. I could feel my legs squirming around and striking into chair legs and boxes, but I couldn't find anything that didn't slip or give way when I tried to turn over. Stritter had caught me off balance, and, already, I was beginning to feel a kind of doom.

After a while Milton's face appeared above us. Although he was yelling, I couldn't be sure whether it was at me or Stritter. He grabbed Stritter's hair and yanked backwards. Stritter's grip slipped for a second, but he plunged away

from Milton and got his hands back around my neck. In the distance I could hear Mrs. Milton. The sound had been going on for a long time, and now it hit me. She was shrieking, "Murder! Help! Police! Police!"

At that instant I felt Stritter's hands loosen again. He sprang up, knocking Milton backward, and stood panting.

"I warned you, Decker. Goddamnit, I told you to leave me alone!"

"What's the matter with you kids," Mrs. Milton cried. "You come in here, you fight, you complain, you don't buy. We don't want your business. Get out, get out, get out!"

"Don't worry," Stritter shouted, "you'll never see me back here again! He turned around and flung open the door and walked out.

After he left I lay on my back for a few minutes and listened to Mrs. Milton, who was straightening up the place. She collected all the pieces of the broken coffee cup, returned the chairs to their places and stood up the display rack. Milton sat at the table, gasping for breath and holding his head in his hands.

"What violence," he murmured, "what violence."

"How can you have a business nowadays?" his mother asked. "How can you when all the customers are villains?"

"I don't know," Milton said, shaking his head sadly.

When I looked at him, I saw for the first time how really flabby he had become. He sat in the chair as though

he were almost dying, and when he took his hand from his forehead, it was shaking.

"You go on back," he said to his mother, "I'll finish up out here."

"You'll finish up," she replied. "How can you do anything if you can't even stand up?"

He waved his hand at her.

"Listen," I said, sitting for the first time. "I think he really tried to kill me."

"Of course, he did," Milton answered.

"Do you really think so," I asked?

Milton nodded.

"My God!" I said, and jumped to my feet. "I wasn't sure myself, but do you honestly agree with me?"

"Would we lie about such a thing?" Mrs. Milton asked.

"My God!" I shouted, "is he mad? What do you let him in here for?"

Milton just looked at me helplessly.

But there was no sense getting excited. I had probably known about Stritter for a long time. I picked up my cigarettes from the table where Mrs. Milton had placed them and put the pack in my pocket. "Listen," I said, "I'm getting out of here." Then I walked out the door onto Main Street.

Outside I looked around for Stritter. He was across the street, standing in the doorway of the Corner Cigar

Store, smoking a cigarette. His collar was up and the wind whipped his coat about his knees. Before the bastard had bummed one of my cigarettes, but now he smoked his own. As I hurried off in the opposite direction, I felt my neck, expecting to find a few of his finger holds.

When I reached Market Street, I got on the bus for Newark--it happened to be waiting there, and I figured I could waste some time in the city before it was time to go to work. The bus was empty except for an old lady, and a Civil War veteran selling poppies. We drove by a lot of taverns where guys were getting plastered and run-down factories and second hand stores, and then we hit the colored section of Newark. Here all the tenements looked like they were going to fall apart. The windows were all broken or patched with cardboard, there were cracks in the brick walls, and the front doors were missing. Back in the hallways the jigs were lounging around. They were probably getting drunk or coked up or something. After that the bus drove on to the center of town and I got off. Just as I stepped down to the sidewalk, the air buzzed, there was the sound of wheels turning, and the clock in the dome of the Courthouse began to strike twelve. I suppose my insides should have told me anyway, but I never do feel very hungry.

From the Courthouse I walked to Grant's Bar & Cafeteria and bought a bowl of pea soup and a hard roll. I would have gotten more than that, except I noticed the counter man had

all these sores on his face, and I thought he probably had a dose. That's the way Grant's is, like the end of the world. I go there because I like poor people and bums. At the moment there was an old man across the table from me, who was putting on a big act about being caught in such a place. He was sitting up straight with his chin resting on his finger tips, but, believe me, he smelled like a garbage can.

After I finished eating, I lit a cigarette and sat there studying the characters. As usual there were a lot of grubby guys sitting at the tables in the center of the room. Everybody was looking around at everybody else, but if their eyes met, they pretended to look right through each other. In the back an old jig had turned away from the bar and seemed to be making a speech to the rest of us. He waved his arms and shouted a lot, but I was too far away to understand him. The only people really listening were five other guys drinking beer at a table in front of him. Every now and then the man making the speech would say something really funny, and these guys would cough over their beer and laugh and smack each other on the back.

I was about to go and see what was such a riot, when a couple of sporty jigs dressed in white sneakers and poplin raincoats came up to the table and began trying to get the old man across from me nervous. At first they just stared at him. Then one jumped up in the air, spun around, and

grabbed his partner in a fast rock-'n-roll. They ended with their heads together under the old man's nose. I thought it was pretty funny, but the old man might as well have been dead.

Before the two dancers could begin a new act, a big commotion blew up back by the bar. A white cop had nabbed the old jig who had been making the speech. Christ, all the colored people in the place shouted and jumped up, but the white cop pushed his way through the crowd and came up between the tables. When they passed I noticed tears were running down the prisoner's cheeks. "Nobody loves me," he cried, "nobody loves me."

"Don't worry, brother," a woman shouted after him.

The cop moved around behind the prisoner and shoved him by one arm, forcing him to walk sideways, with one shoulder lifted and the other arm waving for balance. They went out the door this way, and I ran after them. I wanted to see what the cop would do with him. I pushed through the crowd to the street and saw the green back of the patrol car dart into traffic.

The excitement was over so fast I felt up in the air. I felt like I wanted to run somewhere, do something!

After that I walked a couple of blocks to a movie house where they usually show these fairly sexy pictures. From the advertisements the show looked pretty good; there were a lot of photographs of girls with just their slips on,

and some pictures from old newsreels about gangsters. I looked at the photographs for a few minutes before I bought a ticket and went inside.

The picture didn't come on until one o'clock, though, and the place was still empty. I walked down the aisle a few rows and chose a seat to the side of the theater, but right away I got up again and walked down to the front row and sat looking up at the blank screen. The theater felt terribly hushed and dead, and gradually I became more and more impatient for the lights to dim, and the picture to start. After a while I couldn't stand the suspense any more, so I jumped up and walked back up the aisle. Then I went downstairs to the men's room and sat down in a beat up old leather chair. Although there was no one down here either, at least I could smoke, and the place didn't seem all deadened with carpets. I lit a cigarette and settled back in the chair.

The usher's face stared at me as he leaned over to shake my arm again. "C'mon, buddy, no sleeping here."

I knew I had been trying to wake up for a long time. I remembered dreaming about Woolworth's, and, for some reason, the manager had been mad at me. Now the usher's face leaned forward again, and he grabbed my arm.

"Are you really awake?" he asked.

I nodded.

"If you sleep here, you'll be rolled by every drunk in the city."

"Alright, alright," I muttered, but I felt like I was still dreaming. I remembered how in the dream I had been in the receiving room at Woolworth's when a delivery from the warehouse arrived. The room is dark, and I try to face the fact the bell from the outside has rung, and the cartons are already sliding down from above. Then Toby and a lot of other girls from the store come running in giggling and laughing. They are all eager to say hello to the truck driver, and they want me to stack the boxes right away. I have a hard time, though; the boxes keep falling off my hand truck, and the delivery room is so dark I can't find a place to put anything. The girls laugh at me, and Toby mouth's the word: G-r-e-e-n-t-r-e-e. Gradually I begin to feel more and more hopeless; I can see myself growing sallow from working so long in the dark cellar.

The usher leaned toward me again. "Is this yours?" he asked. He pointed to a cigarette butt that had burned itself out on the chair.

"You got me," I replied, getting sore at the bastard for waking me up.

"Look, kid, don't give me that stuff. Whatta you mean, I got you? You probably almost set the whole goddamn place on fire."

I could see the usher was cracked on this subject, and

there was something really terrible about the way he kept breaking into my dream. It was probably him who made me dream about the manager at Woolworth's. I remembered, in the dream, the manager called me upstairs, and I knew he was going to bawl me out for something. (Really, I felt like a child again, going to my father's bedroom for a beating.) I came up from the stockroom to find the manager waiting for me. "Look at it," he shouts loud enough for everyone to hear. "Look at it!" He points toward the front of the store where I can see the fire extinguisher. It's one of the things I always forget. Each night I'm supposed to leave it upstairs to be used in case of fire, but during the day it should be kept in the stockroom. "Suppose a customer knocks it over," the manager shouts. "What happens if the damn thing goes off?"

At that point the usher shook me real hard!

"Okay, okay," I said, standing up. "Let go of me, will ya?" I lurched across the floor and stumbled upstairs.

While I was in the men's room, the picture had gone on and the theater was dark and crowded. Almost all the seats in the middle were taken, and along the walls there were a lot of drunks and bums, who were all slouched down inside their overcoats, sleeping. I walked down the aisle toward the screen and finally found an empty seat in the front row. Just as I sat down, the man next to me slipped his wine bottle back into a paper bag.

I guessed I had missed the news and the cartoons, because the gangster short was playing already. The announcer was talking about this crook named Willie Scarlatti who had been shot and killed by the New York Police. There was a picture of a crummy rented room with an iron bed, a bureau, and a small table with a bottle of whiskey and some bullets scattered on top. Scarlatti had been turned in by his girl friend, and they showed his body on the floor covered by a bloody sheet.

Then you went on this long goddamn hunt for Willie's brother, Frank. There were a lot of shots of switchboard operators getting tips, and a big deal about the Federal Bureau of Investigation Building in Washington, where they had everybody's fingerprints. At least I knew they didn't have mine yet. Then you went all through this wild country in Oklahoma where the F.B.I. was supposed to have trapped the Scarlatti gang.

The picture ended with this real authentic scene showing the F.B.I. agents and a lot of hicks waiting in the woods for Scarlatti's car to come by on the road. The crooks never had a chance. The car came up this dirt road, and the cops shot about a thousand holes in it. They showed Frank with his head bloody, resting in broken glass on the dashboard. After that this stern F.B.I. agent opened a suitcase containing a few machine guns and rifles, five or six pistols and a hand grenade. Then the film ended and the lights went on.

At first, I thought the lights had been turned up for a short intermission before the feature started. I settled back, but the men on each side of me started leaving. It bothered me, and I looked around nervously; the whole damn audience was emptying out of the theater. For the first time since I had fallen asleep in the men's room, I was really awake! I don't know why, but it made me feel rotten when I saw how much of the day I had lost. Suddenly it felt late, and I wondered what I was doing there. After the picture started again, I got up and left.

The sky was growing dark outside, and the theater lights and neon signs made a sick glow on the faces of the people rushing along the sidewalk. The wind was still blowing strong enough so the men had to hold their hats, and the women clutched their coats together at the neck.

I saw it was much later than I had expected, and that the whole day had escaped me. Finally, because I didn't know what to do with myself, I just started wandering around the city. I walked up to the corner and stood there for a long time, watching people board buses. Then I walked four or five blocks across town to Woolworth's and looked in the back door.

It was near closing time and some of the lights in the ceiling had been turned off. Koker, the other kid who worked after school, was going around the store, emptying the trash bins behind each counter, and most of the girls were standing

in little groups, talking. After a while I spotted the manager working on a display. He was surrounded by glass dividers, pegs, wooden risers, and four or five baskets of merchandise. It was lucky I hadn't gone in that afternoon, as I could see he and Koker would be working long after closing. Suddenly, Mae, the head floor girl, saw me and began calling and waving for me to come inside.

Without thinking I jumped back from the door and ran up the street. I was afraid she might come out after me, and I didn't stop until I rounded the next corner. It was crazy, but I felt like Frank Scarlatti, and I had made some kind of a gigantic escape. Jesus, I wanted to run down the whole next block I felt so excited.

From there I went directly to Market Street and took a bus out of the city.

The first thing I did when I got back was to walk over to Milton's and call Toby up. She tried to put me off, because she said her family was just about to eat supper, but I told her I only wanted to see her for about fifteen minutes. Finally she agreed to meet me on the corner of her street.

I left Milton's right away and walked across town and stood on the corner waiting for her. By that time the wind had turned cold as hell, and it was blowing steadily from the west. I could see how it was blowing high up too, because there was a blanket of grey clouds sweeping across

the sky. When I looked up at the clouds, I got the impression that the whole world was rushing through space.

After I had waited about ten minutes, I saw Toby coming toward me. She was walking slowly with her hands in her coat pockets. When she was just outside the reach of the street lamp, she stopped and waited for me to come over.

Now that I saw her standing there, I didn't know what I really intended to say to her.

"Listen," I said, "I was pretty sore when I first heard about last night, but I've been thinking it over and I don't really care any more."

"Bo," she started.

"Yeah?"

"What happened today?"

"I don't know."

"Everybody says that you got kicked out of school."

"They do, heh."

"Bo, was it because of what I did?"

I looked at her and smiled when she said that. She was wearing a camel's hair coat, and she was standing with her feet together and her hands in her pockets.

"No. I told you that didn't matter. I don't think I'm going to stay in school anyhow."

"Bo," she said, "I'm sorry about what I did...."

I could see she was starting to cry a little. She's

a couple of years younger than me, and she can be an awful fake.

"Don't kid yourself, Toby. I got into a couple of arguments at school, and I just didn't feel like sticking around."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Go some place, I guess."

She walked over and put her arms around me. "Oh, Bo," she said, "I hope it isn't all my fault."

At first I just stood there and acted like I didn't care about anything.

"You know you're the first love," she said, "and that's always the strongest."

I knew that was a hopeless lie, but I did like her quite a bit.

"Not strong enough, though, heh?"

Her eyes opened real wide at that. Then she tightened her arms around me and put her head on my chest where I couldn't see her. I had this sick feeling she would tell me everything if I asked her.

"Do you mean you love Greentree too?" I asked.

She nodded helplessly, as though Greentree was some kind of a drug or something.

I wanted to hit her, but instead I wrenched her face up and ground my mouth down. Her eyes were big and scared under mine, and I slid my hand inside her coat. I knew I

had her. She had to let me. I shoved my hand right down under her skirt between her legs.

"Oh, Bo," she murmured, "I'm so sorry."

I ground my teeth together. "For crissakes! Can't you shut up about it?"

She looked startled and I felt her body stiffen.

"Oh, goddamn, you," I yelled as I shoved her away.

"Goddamn, you!"

She turned about and started walking real fast back toward her house.

"Go ahead," I called out, "get out of here! Beat it!"

I started to follow her, but she heard me and ran down the street. I watched her run into the dim light from the next street lamp and go behind a hedge.

Christ, I felt cheated after she left. I could have had more than a feel if I had been careful. What did I care if it was the situation and not me that got her? I ran away from her corner toward the turnpike. It was a fairly long distance and up hill all the way, but I didn't stop running until I had reached the top. I stood up there for a while, looking back at the town beneath me.

The town had this real cheery supper time look. The street lights were on, the houses had lights in the windows, and Main Street was glowing away like crazy.

It was pretty lonely on the hill, though, and I was all washed out from running. After a few minutes I walked

the rest of the way to the turnpike, and from there I went to the diner at the edge of town.

CHAPTER THREE

At the diner there was only one other customer. He had just finished eating, and now he was flicking the ashes from his cigarette onto his empty plate. He was a real mangy looking bastard with some kind of a rash all over the backs of his hands. All the time he was sitting there he kept burying his face in his hands and rubbing his eyes and feeling his lips and nose with his fingers. I had sat down only a few stools away from him, but I got up and pretended to be looking out the window. Then I went back to the counter, only I sat further away from him this time.

A guy came out from the back, and I ordered a cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie. I knew I only had about four bucks in my pocket and I didn't want to waste any money. As a matter of fact, when I looked up at the clock over the counter and saw it was only about quarter to seven, I was a little worried about the long evening stretching out in front of me. I knew goddamn well I couldn't go home until everybody was asleep, because I would never be able to stand just sitting around the house, and there was even the possibility they had heard about what happened.

After I finished eating, I lit a cigarette and smoked

it by the window where I could watch the traffic on the turnpike. Since I had come into the diner, it seemed like the cars had thinned out a bit and were driving faster. I watched them roar around the corner, flash by the diner, and go off behind the trees in the next bend in the road. I wondered about hitching over to Nutley and going to a movie, but, at the last moment, I decided to call Argenti and see what he wanted to do.

I went to the phone and dialed his number, but the phone just rang and rang and rang. After that I called Milton's.

At the first ring someone snatched the phone off the hook and yelled, "Don't wilt, see Milt! Yes?"

"Is that you, Hayden?"

"Yes?" the voice questioned. This time I was sure it was Hayden, only he was trying to disguise his voice.

Mrs. Milton began shouting in the background. "Get away, get away! leave alone! Do you want to be arrested for interfering with business. That's not a play toy."

"Hey, Hayden," I called out from my end.

"Yeah, who's this?" Before I could answer, I realized he had turned his face to one side and was talking to Mrs. Milton.

"Don't get excited," he told her, "can't you see it's for me anyway?"

"Hayden speaking," he said into the phone.

"This is Bobo," I said, "do you wanna go to the movies tonight?"

"Naw, I think we're gonna go into New York and get loaded."

"You are?" I asked. "You and who else?"

"Stritter and me and Argenti."

"You are? That's great! Pick me up at the diner will ya?"

"I don't know. Let me see what the other guys say."

He left the phone for a few seconds, and when he came back, he told me they would stop by for me in about fifteen minutes.

I hung up, buttoned my jacket, and went outside to wait in the parking lot. The clouds were still blowing over the sky, and the air seemed to be getting damper. I went over by the spotlight that beamed back at the diner. The whole damn place looked pretty mournful, because the lot was empty, and there was a large mud puddle to one side.

While I was waiting, the man with the rash came outside. He walked to the edge of the road and stood there watching for a chance to cross over, but the cars sped around the bend too fast. After a while he put his coat collar up and walked down the road in my direction. For a moment I thought he wanted to talk to me, but he walked right by, and as he disappeared in the dark, I heard him break into a coughing fit.

By then I was sure I had waited at least fifteen minutes, and I was beginning to get scared Hayden wasn't going to show up after all. This really worried me, because I was counting on going to New York more and more. Finally I walked to the other side of the parking lot and tried to look down the road. All I could see was about twenty-five yards to the crest of the hill, where the cars suddenly appeared and came wooshing by.

I waited here for about ten more minutes before I went back to the diner and called Milton's again. This time Milton answered.

"This is Bobo. Is Hayden or Argenti still there?"

"Whatta ya think I'm running--a private club?"

"C'mon, Milton, it'll only take a second."

"No. Nobody's been here all night."

He hung up and I sat down at the counter and had another cup of coffee. I felt so damn restless I almost wanted to go over to New York by myself, but I knew I didn't have enough money.

Then I went outside into the parking lot. God, it was cold as hell and all the cars went by at about a million miles per hour. I was just about to give up and hitch over to Nutley when Hayden's car roared around the bend and swerved into the parking lot. The kid has a real dramatic way of driving; he has this pillow on the front seat which makes him tower over the steering wheel like a gangster.

Since Argenti was sitting in front with Hayden, I had to get in the back with Jack Stritter. Jack had fallen asleep with his head to one side against the window. When I opened the door, he sat up, his eyes wild for a second, before his head lolled back against the window, and he was asleep again.

I kept my mouth shut as I wasn't too anxious for Stritter to wake up. After we had gone a few miles, though-- with Hayden switching from lane to lane like a bastard-- Argenti told me Toby had been looking all over for me that afternoon.

"Yeah," I said, "I was over to see her tonight. The kid is really trying to make a big deal about everything."

I could imagine Toby rushing all over the place, acting worried about what she had done to me.

"Well, what happened, anyway?" Argenti asked.

"I told you I wasn't going to make detention," I said.

"So, what are you going to do--quit school?"

"Maybe," I answered.

The traffic was quite heavy in the towns, but soon we reached the woods and drove alongside the river. We were almost the only ones on the road here, and Hayden whipped us through dark patches and then out along the river again where there were dark stretches of grass and oak trees. At the end of the woods we took the bridge across the river and drove up through Arlington, which was the last town

before the Jersey meadows. Just as we dipped down from Arlington onto the straightaway, Hayden glanced back for a second and said, "Don't look now, but I think somebody is tailing us."

Nobody paid much attention to him, because Hayden always thinks he's being followed by someone. We drove along the road at about 100 miles per hour, and shot past the smouldering garbage dumps, and then we passed the radio stations. I was watching for the towers, waiting to see the lights blinking at the top of the masts. They were there all right, swaying in the wind.

About a mile after the second radio station we had to stop for a red light, and Hayden turned around in order to get a good look out the back window. "Yeah, here he comes," he said.

Stritter suddenly sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Where the hell are we?" he asked.

"We're just crossing the swamp," I said. "Hayden thinks somebody is tailing us, for chrissakes."

The light changed and Hayden turned and started down a different road. A half minute after that we looked out back, and there was a pair of headlights following us.

We drove like hell then. We knew if we couldn't lose this guy on a side street, we could get out of the car and make a run for it. When we reached the first factory, though, all the lights were off and there was a gate across

the side street. At that point I began to feel a little nervous. Up ahead there were electric flashes from the train yards, and I didn't feel too much like running around there at night.

We went by two or three more factories. They were all empty, with locked gates and search lights burning in the yards. It didn't look like the headlights had gained very much, so we decided to try to run as far as the next bridge where we could lose ourselves in the traffic heading into the city.

We were kidding ourselves, though; the headlights had gained quite a lot. By the time we reached the bridge, we could look back and actually make out at least two people sitting in the front seat. We knew they weren't cops, because the car was a beat-up Buick, but we were still a little worried they might be after us for some reason.

When we came off the bridge, the Buick was right behind us. Then the driver gave a real long blast on his horn and came up alongside. There were two jigs sitting in the front seat. The one who wasn't driving looked at us pretty intently, but we couldn't tell what he wanted. Finally the car speeded on ahead.

After that nothing much happened. From there we drove to the Holland Tunnel, and this took us under the river into New York.

It was about 9:00 o'clock when we got out of the tunnel and stopped at the first bar we came to. It was a big old empty place, dark except for a couple of lights burning over the bar. After you were there for a while, you noticed there were pictures on the wall and a room in the back for dancing, but, at first, you couldn't see anything.

We had three or four beers, but the place was really dead. The bartender was also quite a pain in the ass, because he asked to see our driver's licenses, and even after he saw we were eighteen, he acted like he was doing us a favor whenever he put a beer down. Somehow, the bastard really got us into a lousy mood. He was one of those bartenders that acts like he's dying of boredom.

After we bought the first round, I told him I thought the place was dark, but he didn't even answer me. He also had his goddamn juke box unplugged. Argenti asked him to turn it on, and the bartender just looked at him and shrugged. The guy looked like he might not be able to keep awake another moment.

Finally we left, drove over to Canal Street and parked the car, and wandered into about ten other joints. At some of these places we didn't even bother to have one beer; they were these real corny bars with tile floors and big clocks ticking. The other bars were all fairly dark with red lights glowing through the bottles, and about two or three

other customers drinking away.

Around 11:30 we drove up to Chinatown and went into this magazine store where they sell dirty pictures. It's a pretty novel place, because most of the pictures are of Chinese babes. They also have a lot of real evil looking books that are stapled together so you can't thumb through them. All of these are supposed to be special reports on opium smoking, or what happened to the Chinese women when the Japanese attacked.

I admit I was feeling pretty horny when I left there, but--it's hard to explain--I really wasn't feeling too drunk. Jesus, I suppose I had about fifteen beers that night, but I wasn't so drunk at all. Sometimes I've been really plastered and got sick all over the place and fell down when I tried to walk. Tonight, however, I was able to handle myself fairly well.

By the time we found the car again, it must have been about 12:30. We got in the car, and Stritter said he wanted to go up to the village and get laid, so Hayden started driving all over the place like a madman trying to get us up there. We wound all around Chinatown for a while, and then we went down through a narrow street and headed straight for this big grey shape with pillars in front. Somehow, though, the pillars swung around from the front of the car to the side and drifted off behind us. After that we drove around quite a bit, but we never seemed to be able to go

more than one or two blocks without hitting a red light.

"C'mon," Stritter said, "you gotta go up beyond Canal Street."

Then Hayden got on what looked like a pretty promising street, but we only drove a few blocks before I looked out the window and the big grey building with the pillars slipped by again. The whole thing was a goddamn riot, and I began laughing like a bastard, only it was this crazy silent laughter.

After that we drove about ten more blocks and stopped at another tavern and downed a couple of beers. While we were there, I kept looking around at everybody and smirking to myself because they weren't laughing like I was. Christ, I felt like grabbing them by the lapels and shaking them in order to get them started.

Finally we left this place and got back in the car and started driving again. I think Hayden was going pretty slow for a change, but all the buildings and streets kept slipping out from underneath us. I was in the front seat looking straight ahead through the front window. I saw this car come drifting toward us with only its parking lights on, and after that I tried to read a neon sign way down the street. I kept looking at it, expecting to be able to read it at any moment, but before I knew it, the damn thing flashed right over my right shoulder.

We drove a fairly long time after that, and by this

time I was beginning to feel a little sick. Before it got too bad, Hayden stopped the car and I stumbled out. Jesus, I was surprised as hell to see we were parked right next to a river. I walked around the car and went over and looked down into the water. Below me I could hear it lapping against the warf. There was also a breeze blowing off the water, and I took a lot of deep breaths and began to feel fairly decent again.

"How ya doin', Decker?" Hayden called out from the car.

"Alright, alright," I said, "I'm not finished drinking yet."

I got back in the car and we drove around the block to this crummy joint with sawdust on the floor. There was only one other guy drinking at the bar. After a while we decided someone should ask him if he knew where we could get laid. I didn't feel very horny any more, but I went over to him and said:

"Heh, buddy, do you have any idea where a guy can get laid around here?"

He had been hunched over the bar, but now he stood up and gave me this real long exasperated look. "Why pick on me?" he asked.

"I just thought you might know, that's all."

"Well, what the hell gives you the right to walk up to anyone and ask him a goddamn question like that! Do I

look like some kind of a pimp, for crissakes?"

I began backing away, because I could see what I had stumbled into. "Okay, okay," I said, "I'm sorry. Forget I said anything."

Then Stritter called out from the end of the bar. "Why don't you go to hell, chief. He just asked you a goddamn question."

"You keep out of this!" the man shouted.

Stritter came up and stood looking at the man. "Who's gonna make me?" Stritter asked.

"I am," the man said, rushing at Stritter and getting him in this bear hug. Although he was a fairly old bastard, he looked quite powerful.

Stritter went back a few steps, but after he recovered from the first rush, he got his hand on the man's face and started pushing him backwards. The man was shorter than Stritter, and all he did was hang on with this bear hug, while Stritter kept pushing his head back. Then Stritter brought his knee up a couple of times, and the man got this rapt expression on his face. After that the man let go and stumbled over and sat down in a chair.

It was all over so quickly the bartender didn't even have enough time to come around the bar. I didn't care much about it. I felt a little numb as a matter of fact. The man just sat, staring into space.

"I'm going out to the car," I said, turning and walking

out the door.

I walked two or three blocks and the cold air revived me a little. Then I walked a few more blocks and came out on a square with a little park in the middle. The street was empty and there was quite a wind blowing across it from the river. I walked through the park and went over and leaned against a railing and looked out at the river. The river widened here, and I could see some lights on Staten Island.

I didn't feel very drunk any more. As a matter of fact, I really felt quite sober. The wind was blowing like hell and the river looked awfully cold and black and restless. After I stood there for a long time, I decided I wouldn't go home at all. I thought maybe I would hang around the city, and in the morning I could find a place to enlist in the Navy.

I thought about this for a while, and the idea made me feel better and better. I liked it so much I decided to take the subway to the Brooklyn Navy yard so as to be right there when the old sun came up.

I looked back across the park and saw the lighted subway sign and the stairs going down into the ground. There was a bar just in back of the entrance, lit up with a blazing neon. I began walking over, and as I drew closer, I could hear the rock-'n-roll music from the juke box. I think it was Little Richard. I could hear this man-woman

voice screaming anyway, weaving in and out with the maddest saxophone. I reached the subway stairs and danced down to the music. At the bottom the trains rumbled and there was the deafening screech of wheels rounding a sharp turn. Thinking it might be my train, I vaulted the turnstile and ran down another flight of stairs out onto the station platform. It was the Brooklyn train all right, the motors throbbing, and I slipped into the first car just between the closing doors.

I rode in the front, looking through my reflection at the dingy walls and the glinting tracks. As the train went down into the tunnel under the East River, another reflection stood next to mine. He might have come up from the newspapers and wrappers lying on the floor of the car.

I turned and looked at him. He was about forty years old, had thinning hair, and was wearing a grimy trench coat.

"Where ya headed kid?"

"Brooklyn."

"That's where I'm going too," he said.

He put his arm through mine. After a few seconds I tried to pull away, but he held me tighter, and we swayed together as the train rushed down into the tunnel.